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Sound and Fury

By Robert Davidson

We all make music whenever we speak. This has fascinated me for as long as I can remember.

So I was not surprised to find recently that the melodic aspects of speech are learnt before words – most babies are quite adept by eight months. Composers from Janáček to Harry Partch and Steve Reich have seen these melodic aspects as being more primary and profound than words themselves, and have used speech melodies in their compositions.

Jonathan Dimond and I have both worked with speech melodies for some years, composing pieces such as *Spare Change*, *McLibel* and *Self Portrait at age six*. We decided to combine efforts (with help from Jamie Clark) on *Airwaves,* a big piece to celebrate the centenary of international radio. We also thought that this year was a good time to reflect on the just-finished century, the first to be documented with recorded sound. It took us months to sift through a century of international broadcast sound, trying to narrow it down to an hour of notable speeches and news events.

We wanted to hear Churchill, Hitler, Einstein, Mao, Diana, Gandhi, Bush (and many others) *singing*, but without using any electronic trickery to do so. It has been a constant source of surprise and delight to find that, if one looks carefully, clear patterns emerge – including pulse and tonality - in every speech. Each speaker uses idiosyncratic melodic phrases, scales and rhythms. All one has to do is find these patterns and emphasise them with appropriate accompaniment – the motivic and harmonic unity composers are always striving for is already there, built in to the speech.

The links between a culture's music and speech styles become very obvious when one works in this way. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech slides so naturally into a gospel style. Malcolm X speaks how John Coltrane plays. Winston Churchill's lilting rhythms would not be out of place in "Teddy Bear's Picnic". And when Bill Clinton lies about Monica Lewinsky, it fits effortlessly with his favourite Fleetwood Mac song.

Airwaves covers a lot of different genres as it works through the century. Whitlam waltzes his way through "well may we say", Amelia Earhardt does a shuffle, Chamberlain declares WW2 in a grim tango, and Marconi himself, in a strange juxtaposition, becomes a rap artist.

The cast of famous voices is accompanied live throughout by the eight-piece combined band of Loops and Topology, two Brisbane-based contemporary music ensembles.

The piece runs backwards, starting with live broadcasts and working gradually back through the years to Marconi's original transmission. Inspired by the opening sequence of the film *Contact*, we pictured ourselves travelling out into space 100 light years along with the radio waves.

Airwaves is a form of time travel, inspired by the power recorded sound has to take us to the actual people and events. Part opera, part documentary, part entertainment, it is crowded with contradictory voices, its density reflected the intensely busy and noisy century we have just left behind.